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Voices of Anarchist Union Organizers

Duke (Bad Apple Collective)

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2002

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back and called the management out on exploitation, among other things, in a staff meeting in front of everyone, and got fired for it the next day.

Justin: It's not about me.

Arlene: You know what, it's worth it. All the bullshit, all the internal politics. Every time you see workers win it's worth it.

Chuck: I'd like people to know that the labor movement is like any other working class movement, it is full of problems, but it is also full of wonderful folks who want to fix them. Sometimes we don't know how, sometimes we can't make it happen, but there are many, many dedicated people that are making things happen. Twenty years from now I know I'm gonna be proud of the union that I built, and hopefully fifty years from now I'll have trained enough capable people that I'll be able to leave it in good hands and closer to the revolution than when I found it.

Luet: All the bullshit is worth it when you see a group of workers march on their boss and the boss is cowering in their office with the door locked.

Anarchists working for big mainstream unions? The AFL-CIA? What the fuck are they thinking? No doubt they're just cashing in on the backs of the working class. Fat Cats. Sell-Outs. Labor Aristocrats. The Labor Movement is the mediator between capitalists and workers. We don't need mediation. We need a fuckin' Class War. Anyway. If you think the world's that simple, put down this journal [The Northeastern Anarchist], go to Hot Topics at the mall, and buy yourself a new shirt with a nice big circle A in the middle of it. Then go start the class war. Make sure you send us all a post card to let us know how it turns out. Of course the problem with this scenario is that it ain't gonna work, it ain't an anarchist social revolution, and the "masses" ain't gonna leap up and follow you on to victory. Call it a hunch, but the naive notion of spontaneous revolution is the biggest fallacy underpinning the "anarchist movement" in North America. I'll leave it for the big anarchist theoreticians (snicker) to ponder about the exact appropriate methods to achieve social transformation.

In the meantime, most folks are doing what they should be doing. Building a movement that transcends mere activism. A movement that fights racism, patriarchy, and class based society. We need to be organizing and organizing to win. Our organizing must be imbued with the belief that capitalism can be overthrown, that racism can be defeated, and that patriarchy can be demolished. Our strategies must be diverse and adaptable, but most of all, they must engage all areas of our lives. On the job and in the neighborhoods! The simple fact is that ya can't have a Class War without the rest of your class. Any other revolutionary praxis will be tainted with authoritarianism and vanguardism. Why replace one ruling class with another?

A strong labor movement is a necessary component to building working class strength and power. One component of many, but important nonetheless. The state and the corporations have fought tooth 'n' nail to keep workers from organizing successfully. Workers have fought back, but mostly

the bosses have won. They've won to such an extent that the workers' own organizations have accepted their diminished role, from revolutionary organ to class mediator. Unions have become filled with useless functionaries, do-nothing hacks, and ruling class collaborators. Anarchists abandoned the unions and left them to the bottom-feeders. We should feel fucking ashamed of that. 'Cause the rank 'n' file are still there, the unorganized workers are still there, and the unemployed are still there. The bosses are gonna keep on winning and anarchists are gonna sit around and gloat that unions suck. We need to take back the unions. We need to be in them agitating for anarchist ideals: mutual aid, direct action, direct democracy, etc. There also must be a drive to organize more workers. The more we are organized as a class, the stronger we will become. That's why I'm an organizer.

INTRODUCTION

I asked a few folks to tell me a little about themselves and their views on organizing for unions. These six people identify as either an anarchist (with or without adjectives) or as an anti-authoritarian (an anarchist that doesn't know it yet!). They all presently work as union organizers or have worked as organizers in the past. Some others declined to participate. The two main reasons given for choosing not to participate were that people were too busy to bother or they didn't give a shit what the North American anarchist milieu thinks. Those who have participated have been involved either as rank 'n' file or as an organizer with AFSCME, HERE, IUPAT, SEIU, UAW, and UFCW [American Federation of State County & Municipal Workers, Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees, International Union of Painters & Associated Trades, Service Employees International Union, United Auto Workers, United Food & Commercial Workers].

enough or aren't democratic enough, but none of this matters if we aren't training people to lead workers. Too many unions look at organizers as cogs in a wheel, instead of the future leaders of the union. We need to train workers to be shop stewards, stewards to be organizers and organizers to be union leaders. Most unions don't do it, they either have workers become leaders with no real training or they have college kids become organizers and don't train them. They are perfectly happy to have their organizers stay for a year, two or three, but not be in it for the long haul. I think this is the biggest problem. We're in a marathon here, not a sprint.

Dan: This whole organizing commitment is more of a palace revolution than an actual commitment. Staff driven unions with not much accountability to the rank and file are running organizers into the ground.

ANY IMPORTANT INSIGHTS?

To wrap this up, I thought I'd give the organizers a chance to share what they would like people to know about their experiences working in the mainstream labor movement. It's difficult to express why folks do this, especially to someone who is on the outside.

Dan: Be open to different ways of organizing workers. If you don't learn everyday (at least for the first couple of years), you're doing something wrong. Any amount of bullshit is worth it when you see the look on a worker's face after they've marched on the boss. They move from thinking about getting fired to thinking about their co-workers. Sometimes you can see the consciousness in their eyes afterwards.

Matt: It was a demoralizing experience, I had little support, and since I'm the type of person who is not impressed or intimidated by people in power positions, and didn't fall for the management's line about us all being on the same team, I talked

with Immigrant Amnesty. I think this is the next civil rights struggle that could and will be just as big as the sixties.

Arlene: Organizing.

Justin: Organizing new workers. Organizing immigrant workers.

Dan: Committing more resources to organizing.

Matt: Hiring organizers [and] using a direct action model to organize workers

WHY ARE UNIONS STILL FAILING AS WORKERS ORGANIZATIONS?

All right. Everyone knows that unions have some major problems. It would take too long to list 'em all and they have little to do with an organizer's perspective. We are often one-dimensional animals. The phrase "organize or die" is a deeply held belief. What will die if we don't organize, is the chance at a social revolution. So what do anarchist union organizers think the labor movement is doing wrong?

Arlene: Not organizing enough.

Justin: Wasting money. Not trying new ways of organizing new industries

Luet: I think that historically unions have put too much of their resources in servicing their membership and buying politicians. By focusing on and implementing this type of hierarchical model you create a passive membership, not the active, militant membership necessary for change.

Matt: It's using corporate-unions to profit at the expense of workers and not putting enough of the union budget into organizing. [It's] not letting workers have enough control over the actions and the union.

Chuck: I don't know how to answer for all unions, but what I think is glaringly clear is that unions aren't training leaders. I know the common thing is to say that we're not militant

MEET THE ORGANIZERS

I asked everyone to describe themselves politically. Their answers mirror effectively the general trends in the greater anarchist milieu. When asked about their political activity outside of the labor movement, it was equally varied. What also showed is that becoming a union organizer requires so much devotion of time that most folks' other activities tend to be in the past or at least toned down a great deal. Organizers generally work 80+ hours a week. Striped away at a person, they tend to become single-minded, driven, and disturbingly focused. Otherwise they don't last.

Chuck: I'm an anarcho-communist, and I believe that unions offer the best hope of pushing the class struggle and forcing workers to understand that their interests are not the interests of the boss class. When I was younger I was involved in what seemed like a never-ending myriad of anarchists/activist organizations. Since becoming focused on organizing with workers, I've dropped most of them, with the exception of the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] and NEFAC [Northeast Federation of Anarcho-Communists].

Luet: I'm an anarcho-communist. I'm a member of the Roundhouse Collective (NEFAC-Baltimore), Black Planet Book Collective, and Baltimore ARA [Anti-Racist Action].

Arlene: I'm just a person who really fucking hates everything that capitalism is built on. I hate authority, money, injustice, etc. Well if I ever had time for political organization affiliations outside of the labor movement they would be politically progressive.

Justin: I am opposed to a capitalist economy, and the use of a State to oppress people. I see no need for nations or borders. I helped to start a statewide direct action group that worked on mobilization and education around issues of "corporate globalization" I also helped to start a collective (Madhatters) that runs an Infoshop and publishes a newspaper, Hat City Free

Press [Associated with the Danbury Independent Media Center].

Dan: Anti-authoritarian. I haven't had any activity in other political groups since I started organizing. The work is consuming and I live in a different city. Before this, I was involved with Food Not Bombs, taught ESL at a few Latina/o community centers, and was a literacy tutor (1st, 5th, and 6th grades) on Chicago's west and south sides. In college I was in a few student activist groups. We spent most of our time talking and not doing anything.

Matt: I am opposed to oppressive power structures and mean people. I try to struggle against them in my work, my activism and my everyday life, with hopes of creating a fair, just and peaceful world where all people have self-determination and are treated with respect and dignity. Right now I spend most of my activist energy working in the Palestinian solidarity movement, specifically with SUSTAIN (Stop US Tax-Funded Aid to Israel Now!) of which I was a founding member in 2000. I am also doing support work for the International Solidarity Movement—a Palestinian led initiative that brings internationals over to Palestine to do nonviolent direct action alongside Palestinians against the Israeli Occupation .

WHY ORGANIZE?

The question that I really wanted to know from everyone was why they decided to become a union organizer in the first place. Mainstream unions are not known for welcoming anarchists with open arms. What makes people give up their lives to a job?

Arlene: It all began when I was a teenager helping my mom out when she'd clean offices; this motherfucker disrespected my mother in front of me. Other events like that galvanized

WHAT ARE UNIONS DOING RIGHT?

As a reader you should be a little wary of the answers here. I asked everyone what the labor movement is doing right. You should know that all of these organizers work for unions that have committed to doing new organizing. This is a small minority of unions. The bulk of the labor movement is still playing sit 'n' spin with itself, watching worker power evaporate, and holding on to the last of their dwindling membership.

Luet: The declining numbers of union represented workers in this country is finally beginning to hit home with some union bureaucrats. The only way that unions will be able to survive and be effective is to expand, which means they must organize new workers. It's no longer acceptable to just sit back, service the existing membership, and count your days to retirement. I feel that organizing is critical for the long-term success of the labor movement; however, larger numbers does not mean better unions or radical change. Unions need to act as a tool to educate, agitate and empower the working class. Organizing more workers is a step in that direction.

Chuck: I think that the labor movement is a behemoth and you can't speak for it as a single entity. [My union] is engaging in massive amounts of ground up organizing all around the country and not only are we challenging the bosses, but also the laws governing workers. [Our] policy is to not use the NLRB. Around the country we fight bosses for agreements called Card Check Neutrality, which means that the boss has given up and the workers can join the union without fear of being fired or harassed. The idea being that after enough victories it will be standard in the industry to organize this way. It's a long-term victory, but that's the way we have to think about it. Also doing cold shop organizing, that means picking strategic targets, coming up with a plan and sticking to it till we win. But what I'm most proud of is [our] nation-wide drive

Luet: Do it. When you effectively organize workers to take control of their working lives they can go on to take control of their unions and create radical change. There is nothing like a good fight with the boss to radicalize the working class by opening their eyes to systematic oppression.

Justin: Do not come into a movement and culture of working class people with some textbook notion of how the working class should make decisions and see the world. Do not compare yourself to the workers you are organizing. This is not about you. Leave individualist politics at home. This is not about your right to look how you want. This is about winning justice for workers. Do keep your core principles. Spend at least a year in a learning mode. Stick with it. Organizing a large amount of workers along militant tactics and critique is one of the most effective ways to begin changing the political landscape in America.

Dan: Don't get frustrated with the bureaucracy; focus on the workers, not the union. Make several cynical, sarcastic remarks about the union everyday.

Matt: If you're going to try to do this, you need intense psychological preparation. Your reasons for organizing should be to create revolutionary class-consciousness, organize workers on direct action models in democratic unions, and eventually for the workers to overthrow the union bureaucracy and take it over. Your goal should be entirely subversive and you should never let this slip your mind.

Chuck: I'd tell them they should only do it if they like talking to working class people, if they like working as part of a team, if they want to learn and get pushed, and if they are truly dedicated to the long-term struggle. Building a union is not like summit hopping; it is something you should do for the rest of your life. You should learn and grow and become a leader. The labor movement doesn't need more activists. It needs real working class leaders that can take on a fight against capitalism and win.

me into realizing how fucked up the system is. So in college I went to a picket line to check it out and found my "voice." It felt great to scream and be able to do something about fucked up shit.

Luet: I was raised in a union family and have always supported unions. I got a job where I was a UAW member and became a rank and file activist. I learned first hand the importance of an active, militant union in the community and on a local level. I also learned about union bureaucracy and the challenges encountered when dealing with it. My experience in the UAW provided me with a more realistic perspective on how fucked up unions are and how critically we need to change them.

Justin: Because I believe that when people come together in an organized fashion, they can begin to gain the power needed to gain basic human needs. I saw this first hand growing up in a working class family that had our lives dramatically improved when a "union" job meant a better life. As I read about history, my view of labor unions as the most effective instrument for change for the working class was reinforced.

Dan: Idealistic notions of building social change from the ground up via democratically accountable organizations. I ended up working for a union.

Matt: Despite my (at the time not extremely well informed) critique of the mainstream labor movement, I was hoping I would be able to contribute on some level to raising class-consciousness, organizing workers, and improving peoples lives.

Chuck: I was working as a non-union painter in Baltimore, making about \$11 an hour, with no health insurance for me or my kid. I've been an anarchist for years, but I started thinking about my dad and my kid. My dad worked his whole life as a painter and never got anywhere and I hardly knew him 'cause he was always at work. I thought [of my daughter] who was only six months old. I didn't want her to grow up and see the

same things that I saw, her old man dying to put food on the table. That's when I decided to organize my co-workers into a union. We lost the campaign, mostly 'cause the union we organized into was inept. But I worked so hard on the campaign the union just let me in and got me a union job. After a year or so in the painters union, IUPAT, I got fed up with its conservative nature and decided to find a new way that I could build a movement—a way that I could do more to be a leader in a real working class movement. I hooked up with [an organizing union] and they offered me a job.

WHAT'S GOOD?

Since anarchists are always complaining about the problems with unions and union activity and organizers are always complaining that we have no lives and work all the time, I asked folks what the positive things were that they got out of union organizing. The answers were all pretty similar and mirror my own feelings.

Chuck: I've learned a lot of things, but what has changed the most about me personally for the best, is that I'm no longer scared of the idea of taking leadership. Too many working class people are afraid of taking leadership over something. It makes us vulnerable. It means we can mess up and fail. It means we are the ones that have to answer for our actions, we have to make decisions. But I've learned that if we don't do it, the boss wins. We cannot wait for people to come to us, we can't wait for folks to organize themselves, if we want to win, we have to make it happen and that means being a leader.

Arlene: Meeting a lot of great workers, organizers, strength and joy from seeing workers win elections and great contracts.

Luet: You learn more everyday. You meet people every day and help them change their lives and take a stand. It is so easy to encourage people to take on larger issues of oppression,

Arlene: I try and get people to think on a more critical level, in questioning the system they work in, fueling their issues so that they realize you don't have to accept the way things are.

SHOULD ANARCHISTS BECOME ORGANIZERS?

This is a bit of a touchy subject for me. At one point I believed that anarchists should be leading the charge at reclaiming the unions and organizing workers. We started the fuckin' labor movement, we're responsible for all of its militant victories, and did the basic ground work to build the largest working class movement on this continent. Then we allowed it to be corrupted. Why shouldn't we take it back and work to rebuild it the right way? This time we could be smart enough not to give in to the bureaucrats. Right? Well, maybe. I've changed my mind somewhat over time. The bulk of the anarchist movement is already doing really productive work in other areas and the rest are too lazy and self-centered to be able to dedicate themselves to the extremes it takes to be an organizer in an organizing union. Besides, nowadays anarchist work-place agitation means stealing a slurpy from your job at 7-11, not throwing bombs for the eight-hour day. Well, regardless of my opinions, I asked everyone to give advice to anarchists thinking about becoming union organizers.

Arlene: Really fucking think about it because there will be a lot of compromise on some level. Since some degree of being jaded comes into play, you have to think about how much or if you can take the bullshit because it is difficult. When I remember how I first started, shit I thought the labor movement was the last bastion of social change possible. Now I realize that you have to organize people within the "movement". So I just focus on the workers, because if not, the internal politics can really fuck me up because I get disgusted, angry, etc.

decide not to do militant or radical stuff and sometimes we do. It all depends on what we believe will help us win in the long run, not just what feels right doing.

Justin: My belief in workers to determine their destiny within the union bureaucracy helps me to stay focused on my job. Being able to advocate direct action and organized resistance on a daily basis is amazing. I do not let philosophical “lines” or concepts of what I may think is proper structure of leadership or decision-making take priority over winning gains for workers. The workers I have met are more interested in wage increases and gaining power on the job, than consensus decision-making or Bakunin. To me anarchist principles are more about confronting the power of the state and capitalism, than process and hierarchy. As an organizer I am constantly building resistance to the state and capitalism through activity. Workers empower themselves through a process of resisting and seeing it work.

Dan: I try to organize by giving the campaign to the workers, or at least as much of the campaign as they want, and pushing them to run it and make major strategic decisions themselves. There’s a world of difference between an organizer driven [representational] campaign and a [hot shop] campaign of motivated leaders.

Matt: You have to organize workers into strong democratic unions on direct action models and try to help them build strong locals, eventually inoculating them (and politicizing them) about the role of the international, and advising them on how to remain largely independent from the international (and eventually on how to get more and more radical). The workers should run their own local, their own meetings, and plan their own actions. The goal is to help them get to that point. Right now we need to organize as many workers as possible on direct action models with democratic decision-making procedures and in the process do as much political education as possible, with a total focus on worker empowerment.

racism, sexism and capitalism when they see that collectively and individually they have power and can make a difference.

Matt: I’ve been able to talk to workers all day everyday. I have learned very systematic and efficient ways of organizing large amounts of workers—skills that could be applied in organizing people elsewhere (including interpersonal skills). I’ve been able to organize workers on direct action models, where both blue and white-collar workers have come together to take direct action against people in power, and have subsequently realized that they can achieve things that way. This is a progressive (continually progressing) consciousness raising experience for them that correlates to their actions steadily becoming more militant.

Dan: Seeing a worker that was too scared to even open the door on the first home visit and then march on the boss a month later. You actually see and win tangible victories: all the elections last year, etc., instead of talking about what might happen on the off chance that you actually win.

Justin: Seeing people transform from pieces of a machine to human beings.

WHAT’S WRONG WITH UNIONS?

This couldn’t really be an article about working for mainstream unions without a little trash talking. It goes without saying that unions today are pretty fucked up, but I wanted to keep people focused on organizing. The answers are not too unexpected. Justin and Chuck seem to be coming from one perspective and the rest from another.

Arlene: The bureaucratic bullshit that goes on. I’ve seen long-timers who dedicated themselves to this movement not get paid, or get fired because they can’t organize in good English. Shit like that. Plus the hypocrisy I’ve seen in the higher echelons of the organizing department.

Luet: Dealing with the bullshit exploitation of organizers by the union. Every day you attempt to fight the exploitation of workers by their employer and it's no different when your employer is a union. I'm not talking about salary and benefits so much as the basic respect and dignity which people seem to forget about once they are in the role of management.

Chuck: I'm sure I'll get attacked for this statement, but I've been a member of two unions now, and I don't see any negative aspects of union organizing. I think that some unions don't do real organizing, and that is the problem. Unions that organize top-down or carry out purely electoral NLRB campaigns, that's a problem because it doesn't challenge the system and it's not building power. But what I do, I don't see anything negative.

Matt: My (now more informed) critique of the labor movement is wide and on many levels. Mainstream unions were institutionalized to mediate between capital and labor and to demobilize revolutionary working class mobilization. The union that I worked for (before I got fired) uses masses of expendable contractual labor to do almost all their organizing. This contractual labor is usually worked between 50–80 hours a week, somewhere in the middle being the average, not knowing your schedule the day before, and having no collective input into hours. The campaigns are run largely in a top down, often authoritarian manner, where organizers have a say in some things but not in others. [The unions] instill the same [corporate] feelings into organizers who quickly fail to see the union management as their adversary, and as the enemy of the working class more generally. There are exceptions. There are politically conscious, anti-authoritarian organizers in the labor movement, who do exist within this environment, being conscious of it, and eventually aiming to overthrow it, but they are few and far between.

Justin: It is very difficult work and I have seen many good organizers blame the institution of “union bureaucracy and hierarchy” when they were experiencing difficulties, or when the

job was becoming monotonous. It is most difficult to continue to try and inspire, motivate and organize workers, when nearly every aspect of American society is opposed to the collective power and community that you are advocating. That becomes even more difficult when the movement itself is divided.

Dan: Rarely is anything really built from the ground up. Absurd directives from the top. No communication between different departments of the union. Micro-management. The fuckin' bureaucracy.

KEEPING YOUR INTEGRITY

Most people think that it's difficult to work for a union and maintain anarchist principles. To put it bluntly, how can we integrate anarchist beliefs with our work in the labor bureaucracy? The answers appear much simpler than one would think.

Luet: I try very hard to allow people to make decisions for themselves while educating them on what possible courses of action they can take. It can be very hard to promote non-authoritarian based decision making at the membership level when as an organizer you are constantly forced to deal with top down decision-making from the international level. It's also difficult to institute non-authoritarian decision-making processes when working in a hierarchical system. But you have to try.

Chuck: I get asked this a lot, but it's mostly by people who don't understand how unions work. I don't deal with a labor bureaucracy. I know there are labor bureaucrats out there, and there are, I'm sure, some in my union. But the truth is that I don't have to deal with it. I work with a team of dedicated organizers who want to build a movement. I don't have someone telling me I can do this and can't do that. There is a team of us that decides how to build a movement and sometimes we